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Strategies to Facilitate Grading Consistency in Large Classes

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Abstract

First year undergraduate university classes can be very large, and big student numbers often creates a challenge for instructors to ensure assignments are graded consistently across the cohort. This session describes and demonstrates the use of interactive audience response technology (ART) with assessors (rather than students) to moderate assignment grading. Results from preliminary research indicate this method of moderating the grading of assignments is effective, and achieves more consistent outcomes for students.

Brief Bibliography

Assessment feedback is frequently the least satisfactory aspect of the student experience (Beaumont, O'Doherty, & Shannon, 2007), so improving the consistency of feedback and grading is important. One of the major challenges for instructors of large classes is to maintain assessment consistency (Preston, 1997) across these teaching teams. The backgrounds of the multiple teachers required for these large classes are often as diverse as their student populations, and they bring varying levels of teaching experience (Nelligan, 2007) and cultural perspectives.

Summary

First year undergraduate classes frequently contain hundreds of students, and as a result teaching teams are often used to deliver content, as well as grade assignments and exams. This variance in experience and culture influences the subjective evaluations teachers use to judge the content of student assignments and these assignments then require post-grading moderation – a time consuming and sub-optimal process. What is required is a more efficient and effective way to moderate assignment grading.

Recent developments in education technologies have allowed instructors to use interactive Audience Response Technology (ART) devices in lectures, seminars and tutorials. Using either a specific hand-held device, or any Internet enabled machine (iPhone, iPad, Blackberry, laptop computer, netbook etc.), students can respond to questions instructors pose on PowerPoint slides, and receive immediate feedback via automatically generated output slides.

ART is used for many reasons: it allows feedback from large numbers of students; it engages students and encourages interactivity; it allows anonymous

responses from students who would otherwise be too shy; and even allows instructors to collect data in a classroom setting. Often, assignments in large classes marked by teaching teams are moderated after they are marked. The grades assigned by each marker are adjusted depending on how they compare to a benchmark or average. Although somewhat useful, this is a crude system, and does not deliver consistency for students because it paints each marker as easy, average or hard, and then subjects the assignments to broad increases or decreases.

This teaching innovation moderates assignments before they are graded, and requires the use of interactive ART and Criterion Referenced Assessment (CRA). CRA evaluates students' assignments against criteria, defined as desirable qualities or dimensions of a student's performance. Preliminary qualitative data reveal the teaching team responds well to using ART in moderation sessions.

Some representative quotes include: "ART helped me give more honest ratings without feeling embarrassed or pressured" "It made it [grading] more transparent" "I had the opportunity to give more honest feedback and learn from more experienced markers about the norms" "Previous moderation meetings were generally brief, tutors were given samples and tutors agreed the grades given but without inputs from every tutor, I believe it resulted in 'groupthink'...Keypads encouraged more feedback, especially [sic] everyone had the opportunity to provide feedback" "Allows all to indicate their views without dominant personalities taking over"

Implications for Practice

Implementing this teaching innovation is simple, and effective implementation creates time efficiencies for instructors and greater consistency for students. Step 1 Prepare a few slides for your teaching team comparing the CRA with some anonymized relevant sections of various student assignments. Step 2 Gather your teaching team and provide them with response devices, or allow them to use their Internet enabled phone or laptop Step 3 Show your team the slides and ask the markers to use the response devices to assign the mark they would normally give Step 4 Display the anonymous results instantly, and discuss the discrepancies in an anonymized and non-confrontational way.

Using the innovation allows assignment graders to be honest when evaluating sections of the assignment, and prevents the vocal and confident minority from dominating proceedings. Graders will better understand the standards of grading required, and instructors have more confidence that some students will not be disadvantaged by inconsistent interpretation of CRA or by having a hard marker.